

Teaching Medieval Art History to Art Students

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Teaching medieval art history effectively to fine art students presents unique pedagogical challenges. It requires an understanding of what such students are like and an adaptation of teaching methods and materials to deal with their unique characteristics. I have taught classes of art students for five years, first at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and currently at the Rhode Island School of Design. Through these experiences I have discovered much about the learning habits of young artists and developed pedagogical strategies for effectively teaching such students about the Middle Ages. While these strategies were initially developed at the School of the Art Institute in classes composed entirely of art students, it is hoped that they may be useful to medievalists in dealing with single fine art students who appear in their courses.

The distinctive characteristics of art students may not be apparent to the medievalist who sees only an occasional fine art student in his or her classes, but are readily perceivable when one is presented with an entire class of such students. Initially the conventionally trained medievalist is aware of tremendous academic diversity within the student body. This is, of course, because academic achievement is not the primary admission criterion at an art school. A disproportionate number of the students have learning disabilities, especially dyslexia, or are not native English speakers. Again, while markedly affecting a conventional academic careers these factors do not affect a portfolio's quality at all. And it has even been suggested that dyslexics are pushed towards the fine arts as compensation for their lack of recognition in traditional academic areas. Like the low achieving liberal arts student, many fine art students come to post-secondary school improperly prepared. A substantial number has never written a research paper, and do not know how to approach a research library. Although the students I taught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago had access to the Art Institute's Ryerson Library, the largest art history library in the Midwest, they needed much encouragement to use it. I have also found that art students are especially vague about historical and geographic particulars. Many have never heard of Charlemagne and can't find Rome on a map.

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